

**Testimony of Peter W. Morrill,
General Manager, Idaho Public Television,
Before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, and the Internet
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Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Stearns, thank you for the honor of testifying before you today on behalf of Idaho Public Television and the Association of Public Television Stations (APTS). The transition to digital-only broadcasting is obviously foremost on my mind and the minds of my public television colleagues, and we appreciate your focus on ensuring that the nation navigates the transition successfully.

Idaho Public Television is governed by the Idaho State Board of Education, and is based in the capital city of Boise, with additional staffed facilities in Moscow and Pocatello. Over the past 44 years, Idaho Public Television has grown from a single station to a network of five analog and five digital transmitters and 39 translators that collectively reach more than 97 percent of Idaho's population, as well as portions of six other states and Canada, over the air. Idaho Public Television, like its public television counterparts across the nation, has embraced the added capacity digital broadcasting offers to the citizens of Idaho with expanded educational and informational content. We currently use our digital spectrum to broadcast statewide four simultaneous streams of both national and local programming: our primary channel, our high-definition channel, the education-focused Learn channel, and the World channel, which features news, history, and travel programming. When the Idaho House and Senate are in session, we break into our normal Learn and World programming to air their full gavel-to-gavel proceedings live throughout the state.

Many of our estimated 400,000 over-the-air viewers have taken part in the Converter Box Coupon Program or purchased new digital televisions and are already enjoying the benefits of

digital television. Our experiences with soft shutoffs, and our colleague stations' early analog terminations, have been smoother than many anticipated or feared. Some viewers have experienced disruptions, but many of the problems they experience, mostly related to converter box and antenna installation and operation, are easily resolvable when local broadcasters and their partners, with expertise in the communities, have the resources to conduct hands-on community outreach.

But some viewer reception issues will not be easily or inexpensively solved. Some people live within a station's primary service area and are blocked by challenging geography from receiving digital signals. I come to you from a state whose geography has always been, and will continue to be, a challenge to the human spirit. In September 1805, our Bitterroot Mountains nearly repelled the Lewis and Clark expedition. The Oregon Trail, that crosses our southern desert reaches, has been called "the longest cemetery in the world" due to the terrible toll that it took on pioneering families. Idaho is a remarkable place of contrasting altitudes and attitudes, its geology imposing its will on our human efforts. And that truth continues into the digital age.

Idaho Public Television has identified six areas, primarily located in rugged terrain, that despite their best efforts will not be able to receive public television signals in digital that they have historically gotten in analog. In late December 2008, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) addressed this need for digital television "fill-in" service, but many stations lack the financial means to license and build these systems in time for the June 12, 2009 shutdown. Simply put, challenges remain as we approach June 12, but legislative encouragement and additional funding can help us ensure the smoothest transition possible and minimize the permanent loss of over-the-air service, especially in rural areas.

For the past several years, Idaho Public Television has been committed to ensuring a trouble-free digital transition for all the citizens of our state. Since last July 1 alone, Idaho Public Television has broadcast more than 52 hours of digital television consumer education announcements on our statewide analog television system. Our efforts were bolstered in January by the \$35,000 consumer assistance grant we received from the FCC. Our success in reaching the most vulnerable populations in our state, and the similar success of the four other public television recipients of the FCC grants, reinforces what we have long stated—that public television stations, given adequate resources and time, are ideally situated to provide the high-level consumer outreach and assistance needed in these final weeks of the digital conversion. With an additional \$90 million from the stimulus package dedicated to consumer outreach surrounding the coupon program, we are hopeful that many more public television stations will receive the resources to promote an expanded viewer education effort, including the walk-in centers and, especially, the in-home assistance that we believe will be needed both in the days leading up to stations' transitions, and in the days and weeks following.

Finally, we hope that members of this authorizing committee will support increased federal funding for public television to offset the dramatic declines in revenues from other sources and to help local public television stations deliver the promise of digital broadcasting—with multiple streams of unique educational content—to all Americans.

Much Work Has Been Done, But Some Challenges Remain

For the past five years, Idaho Public Television, like other broadcasters, has conducted a comprehensive campaign to inform viewers of the new exciting services available through digital television, and to assist them with the analog shutoff. This effort has seen positive results: the National Association of Broadcasters recently reported that 97 percent of all households

nationwide are either aware that television is switching to digital, knowledgeable that the transition will impact over-the-air signals, or able to identify the correct transition date. Idaho Public Television will keep all of our five analog transmitters on-line until June 12, so we have not directly confronted the ultimate test of the digital conversion. But our four local soft analog shutoffs tests, and the early analog terminations by stations across the country, have taught us all that while a totally seamless transition is perhaps impossible, there is much more we can do, given sufficient resources, to address the remaining challenges.

The first and most basic challenge before us is that, despite extensive on-air and on-the-ground consumer outreach, a portion of the population remains unprepared for the analog shutoff. This is particularly problematic in markets such as Idaho that have a high percentage of over-the-air households. Though it is difficult to track the rate of conversion in smaller markets, where television viewing is not monitored by electronic meter, Nielsen tells us that as of November 2008, 18.3 percent of homes in the Boise market still were unprepared for the transition, compared to 7.7 percent nationwide. While we estimate this number is down nearly 25 percent from a year before, it does show that as of a few months ago, nearly one in five households in Boise either hadn't gotten the message about the digital transition, had decided not to do anything about it, or cannot do anything about it. We believe that many of those people are part of at-risk populations, especially the elderly or low-income. Thus, in some parts of the country, it appears that basic outreach may still be needed.

The second challenge is that, as we have suspected, and as the early analog shutoffs of many stations have proven, even when people believe they are ready for the transition, they often encounter problems anyway. For financial or logistical reasons, approximately 40 percent of public television stations terminated their analog service on or before February 17, 2009.

Stations received anywhere from dozens to hundreds of calls from viewers in the days after February 17. In most of these cases, these callers were aware of the transition and had obtained a converter box, but had problems with converter box installation or operation, or with antenna placement and reception. For example, WSIU, a public television station in southern Illinois, received calls from many viewers who had been directed by a local big-box store to purchase an antenna that was actually UHF-only. Because the station moved its digital operations from the UHF band to the VHF band as part of its federally mandated transition, these viewers had been able to receive the station in digital before the station made its final transition, but now needed to go out and purchase a new antenna. To solve these types of problems, it is crucial that telephone help centers are staffed with well-trained personnel who are equipped to address complex, technical and location- and station-specific issues.

The early analog shutoffs have also reinforced something we have discovered in our outreach at Idaho PTV: There is a significant, overarching need for in-home assistance for converter box and antenna installation and operation. Over the past year, we have had no more than three people actually walk into our offices with their converter box or antenna, seeking assistance. However, we have received hundreds of calls from viewers, most of them elderly, who need someone to come into their homes, install their converter boxes, and adjust their rooftop antennas. Clearly, sending qualified technicians to people's homes to help creates significant staffing, budgeting and legal hurdles that are difficult to surmount under current circumstances. But this need will continue in the days and weeks leading up to and after stations' analog terminations, as more viewers realize that they are ill-equipped to make the transition. Again, we have found this need for in-home assistance especially acute with elderly populations that we serve, who live on modest fixed incomes.

The third challenge is that even if viewers are aware of the transition, even if they have done everything possible to prepare themselves, some simply will not be able to get all of the same stations they did before the transition because of the differences between the analog and digital technologies. In some cases, this is because stations have experienced a reduction or change in their service contour as a result of the switch to digital. In other cases, viewers within the service contour may lose coverage because of the digital “cliff effect.” In analog, television signals deteriorate gracefully. You get a picture, good or snowy, but you still get a picture. But in digital, there can be areas where viewers do not receive a signal at all due to geographic or other obstructions, particularly when a station moves from its assigned VHF channel to its assigned UHF channel. UHF signals are less reliable where the terrain is mountainous.

As an example, the FCC estimates that our fully maximized Boise station, KAID, will not reach 11,512 people in primarily mountainous communities because of differences in the propagation of the federally assigned UHF digital channel. Luckily some of these communities have been historically served by our translator systems and will continue to receive service after June 12, 2009. But many of these rural areas will need new digital television “fill-in” service, including the communities of Idaho City, parts of Emmett, Glenns Ferry, Boise Front/Harris Ranch, Wood River Valley and the Portneuf Valley. This situation is especially critical given that five of these six areas are seats of county government.

Late last year, after years of complaints from broadcasters and viewers, the FCC announced that it will permit stations to use Distributed Transmission Systems (DTS) and/or digital terrestrial translators (DTT) to fill in areas not well served by digital transmitters. This was an important step, but because of the short timeframe and the current desperate economic

situation in which stations find themselves, it will be extremely difficult to deploy these systems in a timely fashion.

As I have noted, we have identified six high-priority areas that will require DTS or translator fill-in service. However, we need \$600,000 to pay for the equipment, and we do not have funding in place at this time. Furthermore, FCC rules require that DTS or replacement translator systems be built within 180 days of receipt of a construction permit, and the federal funding sources that we typically look to for assistance, including the Public Telecommunications Facilities Program (PTFP) at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) at the United States Department of Agriculture, do not have timeframes that would enable a build-out within 180 days, or before the June 12, 2009 deadline. In addition, some of these federal grants require a local match of at least 25 percent. Given the large size of the “fill-in” project and short deadlines, this match requirement may pose an insurmountable challenge to Idaho Public Television in these tough economic times. We have spoken to, and filed comments in January with, the FCC regarding this issue and are hopeful the Commission will revise this rule to help public and commercial television stations use these technologies to enhance their digital service. Even if this occurs, however, the current federal grant programs are under-funded to meet demand and require a substantial local match, which at this time is going to be problematic at best, impossible at worst, given current economic realities.

Continuing in analog for an extra four months has placed a significant financial burden on Idaho Public Television and other public television stations. In January, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) estimated that the delay would cost the entire system \$22 million; my own organization is currently in need of \$30,000 in additional funding for energy costs alone

to provide continued service to June 12. This effort compounds the difficulties public television stations are already suffering in the current economic climate. Every revenue source upon which public television depends is under siege. State funding represents 25 percent of our budget, but for the current fiscal year 2009, the State of Idaho has required us to cut \$165,900 worth of already appropriated state funds intended for the replacement of needed equipment related to the digital conversion. In addition, we are projecting that the state will permanently reduce our fiscal year 2010 operating funding by \$295,200 as compared to the beginning of fiscal year 2009. The state also eliminated our fiscal year 2010 request for needed capital equipment funding for our last major piece of the statewide digital conversion totaling \$1,123,300, which was approved and supported by the Idaho State Board of Education. Private funding, which represents 61 percent of our budget, is down for our stations, but it seems we are better situated than many of our public television colleagues, who are seeing 30 percent or greater declines.

Until we are able to overcome these financial obstacles, numbers of Idaho citizens throughout our viewing area may be left without service. Thus, I respectfully request this Committee's assistance to support digital television "fill-in" service by expanding the build-out window rule to a minimum of two years and by making funding available immediately and without a local match requirement, to enable service to rural areas and seats of county government as a priority.

Taking the Final Steps Toward A Successful Transition

Idaho Public Television is now moving toward the end of what has been an intensive 18-month consumer education campaign. In January, we were excited to receive a consumer assistance grant from the FCC that has helped us supplement our existing outreach efforts. We were conservative in our request and our assessment of how we could use the money in such a

brief period of time before the old “hard date” of February 17, 2009, and we have spent the \$35,000 grant in a targeted and effective manner.

The money permitted us to hire an additional full-time engineer to respond to technical over-the-phone and e-mail inquiries until mid-March. It allowed us to produce two additional live call-in shows, one thirty minutes and the other sixty minutes, with follow-up assistance from engineers beginning in early January and through mid-March. It enabled us to contract with a call center to provide after-hours, quality assistance to viewers. And it enabled us to produce six additional informational spots discussing specific impacts on viewers in fringe areas, the importance of antenna placement and type, channel changes from VHF to UHF, the need to rescan or enter channels after hooking up a converter box, and the impact the transition will have on viewers who receive their television via translators.

Other public television recipients of the FCC grants have engaged in similar and additional initiatives. WOSU in Columbus, Ohio, has teamed with the Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging and the LifeCare Alliance to train their staff and volunteers to install converter boxes in homes and senior residences. Wisconsin Public Television brought on board a new Special Populations Outreach Coordinator to travel the state focusing on “hard to reach” populations. WXXI in Rochester, New York, trained a team of installers to provide in-home assistance to those identified by the station as needing additional assistance.

We have done much, but with more money, we and our public television colleagues could do much more. Thus, we are gratified that Congress specified that \$90 million of the funds dedicated to the Converter Box Coupon Program in the recent stimulus law may be steered toward consumer outreach, and we are hopeful that NTIA and the FCC will direct much of this funding toward public television stations, who are particularly well suited to help consumers in

the final months, weeks, and days of the digital transition—and even in the days and weeks afterward. Provided with adequate resources, local public television stations have a unique combination of technical expertise, public trust, and unmatched access to the local community that will enable them to take the steps we suggest are needed in these final weeks:

- **Organize Local Telephone Help Centers.** Stations can offer local expertise regarding location specific reception issues, and station technical staff can provide higher-level resources to address complex problems.
- **Establish Walk-in Help Centers.** Stations can provide assistance with installation and reception issues, offer information on the availability of converter boxes and antennas at local retail establishments, and distribute converter boxes.
- **Coordinate On-site Installation of Converter Boxes and Antennas.** Stations can track calls and visits to help pinpoint individuals who need in-home assistance, and can work with partner agencies—including meal delivery services, electronics retailers, and elder services organizations—to organize, conduct and supervise installation of converter boxes and antennas at residences of at-risk populations.
- **Broadcast Live Call-in Programs.** Stations can have engineers and technical staff on hand to respond to viewers during and after programs, and make programs available for viewing on-line.
- **Initiate and Maintain Communications with Over-the-Air Viewers.** Stations can contact members that are known to be over-the-air viewers and offer follow-up assistance to ensure successful transitions.

- **Provide Post-Transition Assistance.** Stations can continue telephone and walk-in help centers and in-home assistance in the weeks after the transition.

I encourage the members of this Committee to advocate to the FCC and NTIA the invaluable role that public television stations have played throughout this consumer education campaign and can continue to play during the end game, given adequate resources.

Finally, in my rare moment in front of this committee, which has critical authorizing jurisdiction over broadcasting matters, I must emphasize the need for increased federal funding for general public television station operations and capital projects to offset the dramatic declines in revenues from other sources of funding— individual contributions, corporate underwriting, and states — that constitute 85 percent of public broadcasting’s total operational revenue. Data compiled from a survey conducted by APTS in January and February projects a decline in non-federal revenue of fifteen percent in 2009. The estimates for 2010 are even bleaker. And every day brings more news of station programming, personnel and service cuts. General Motors recently announced the end of its 22-year underwriting relationship with legendary filmmaker Ken Burns which has been critical in creating documentaries like “The Civil War,” “Jazz” and “Baseball.” WETA, here in our nation’s capital, upon which the public television system relies for such outstanding programs as *The News Hour*, announced a 13 percent reduction in workforce. Thirteen/WNET and sister station WLIW in New York announced in January that they would be cutting their combined budget by 8 percent and reducing their staffs by 14 percent, or about 80 positions. Last month, Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell presented a budget that completely eliminated funding to the state’s eight public television stations, which had received more than \$12 million the previous year.

The funding and revenue decreases do not reflect a waning of enthusiasm for public television, but show that public television is inevitably caught up in the cross-currents of economic contraction. Ironically, on the verge of the digital transition, when public television stations are emerging as truly multi-platform digital public service media capable of serving our communities with unprecedented effectiveness, we are facing dramatic cuts and, in the case of some stations, a fight for survival. The digital transition holds great promise to provide greatly expanded content, and public television stations are already using these new capabilities to advance education, public health and safety, and job training. We ask for the support of members of this authorizing committee for increased federal funding so that public television may weather this current economic typhoon and continue to provide innovative content and unparalleled outreach to help all Americans do the same.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Stearns, I thank you for this opportunity to share with you public television's experience with the digital transition and to offer our services as an invaluable partner as we all strive to make sure our most vulnerable citizens are prepared to receive the full benefits of digital. All of us in public television look forward to continuing to work with you as you consider the important final steps necessary to a successful transition, and as Congress considers our funding requests and other issues of importance to public broadcasters.